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Libby health money debated

By BRENT SHRUM
Special to the Inter Lake

LIBBY — A \$2.75 million settlement intended to benefit victims of asbestos-related disease is being jeopardized by lack of agreement on who should manage the money, Dr. Brad Black told the rest of the county health board Wednesday.

W.R. Grace has agreed to provide the money for health care, as part of an agreement to settle an access dispute with the Environmental Protection Agency.

A local nonprofit group, approved by Grace and the U.S. Department of Justice, would manage the money.

"Right now they perceive there's a lot of dissension in the ranks," Black said. "I've gotten feedback on this thing and they said you need to do what you can to get this thing back in line."

The Environmental Protection Agency already has worked with representatives of the Lincoln County Community Health Center on the issue.

The health center is eligible to receive the money but has held off on making a commitment because it wants to be sure it's doing what's best for the community, board member George Keck said.

"This whole romance could be ended tomorrow by the CHC saying we'll take it, because we've already been offered it," he said.

A court hearing on the issue has been scheduled for Friday, Keck said. According to the terms of the agreement, an organization is to be in place to accept the settlement money within 10 days of that hearing, he said.

Various possibilities for the management of the money were discussed during a meeting last week called by St. John's Lutheran Hospital.

In addition to the health center, they include an asbestos victims group, the hospital's Center for Asbestos Related Disease — provided it reorganizes as a stand-alone nonprofit entity with its own board — and an entirely new group formed for the purpose of receiving the settlement funds. The county itself is not

eligible, sanitarian Ron Anderson said.

Commissioner Marianne Roose spoke against using the health center to manage the money.

The health center is intended to provide primary care for everyone in the county and should not be tied to asbestos-related health care, Roose said.

Efforts to get the center started ran into trouble because of the perception that it was aimed mainly at providing care for asbestos victims, she said.

"You put the two together and you start running one under the umbrella of the other, I think you're going to run into trouble with that perception across Lincoln County," she said.

Black stressed the importance of forming a partnership to keep all interested parties involved. Commissioner John Konzen agreed.

"If we do this correctly and mold this into something, everybody benefits," Konzen said.

Konzen said he would ultimately like to see the Center for Asbestos Related Disease clinic handle the money itself.